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ABSTRACT

Children's interpretations of social experiences were compared to adults' interpretations of the same experiences in a study involving 151 children between 6 and 12 years of age and the mothers of a subsample of 43 of the children. Seventy-six participating children were asked to describe some of their social experiences and generate attributions for these events; an additional 75 children then coded the attributions on the dimensions of internality, stability, and control. The interviews were conducted at the Arts and Computer Camp, University of Waterloo (Ontario), and taped on a hidden tape recorder. Subsequently the children's parents listened to the stories and the attributions in their homes, and then coded the attributions on the same three dimensions. The parents completed the task for two children (their own and a stranger) and did the coding twice: once from an adult's perspective and once from a child's. Differences were found between the parents' adult- and child-perspective codings, indicating that adults have theories about children's social perceptions. However, for the most part, adults were unable to predict the children's actual responses. Moreover, though parents felt they were more accurate when coding their own child's attributions than those of the other child, no effects were found for parent's acquaintance with the target child. Implications of these findings for research on peer relationships are discussed. (RH)

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Parents and Children Analyze Children's Attributions for Social Experiences

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Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Baltimore, April, 1987.

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ABSTRACT

Children's interpretations of social experiences were compared to adults' interpretations of the same experiences. Children were asked to describe some of their social experiences into a tape-recorder, generate attributions for these events, and then to code these attributions on the dimensions of internality, stability, and control. Subsequently the children's parents listened to the stories and the attributions, and then coded the attributions on the same three dimensions. The parents completed the task for two children (their own and a stranger) and did the coding once from an adult's perspective and once from a child's perspective. There were differences between the parents' adult and child perspective codings, indicating that adults have theories about children's social perceptions. However, for the most part, adults were unable to predict the children's actual responses. Moreover, though parents felt they were more accurate when coding their own child's attributions than the other child's, there were no effects for knowing the target child. The implications of these findings for research on peer relationships are discussed.

Parents and Children Analyze Children's Attributions for Social Experiences

Much of the research on children's attributions stems from Weiner's (1974) application of attribution theory to achievement motivation. Weiner suggested that children's explanations of their academic successes and failures can influence their future expectations and performance. Although a great deal is known about children's attributions for achievement outcomes, less is known about children's attributions for social success and failure. Such attributions are the focus of the present research. Both children's and adults' perceptions of these attributions are examined.

First consider the children's own perspective. Past work has examined attributions for social experiences as they relate to social skills and peer relationships. Children with peer relational difficulties see social success as less stable and more externally caused than children with no peer relational problems. Further, children with peer relational problems see social failure as more stable and internally caused than children with no peer relational difficulties (Ames, Ames & Garrison, 1977; Goetz & Dweck, 1980; Hymel, Friegang, Franke, Both, Bream & Borys, 1983; Sobol, Scott & Earn, 1983) This represents a negative or pessimistic view of social experience. Other aspects of children's social attributions have received little attention. In this study,

differences between attributions for success and failure outcomes were considered, as were age and gender effects.

A second focus of this research is adults' perceptions of children's attributions. In this context, four major questions were examined:

1. Do adults have "theories" about how children explain their social experiences?

2. Are children's interpretations of their attributions for social events something that adults are able to predict?

3. Do adults and children have common interpretations for attributions for children's social events?

4. How well do parents think they agree with children's interpretations and do their estimates correlate with reality?

Children were asked to relate six real-life social experiences (three positive and three negative) into a tape-recorder. They were then asked to generate attributions for these events and to code these attributions on the dimensions of internality, stability and control. Children's self-codings of their own social attributions were then compared with the codings of five other coder groups: peer, parent adult-perspective, stranger adult-perspective, parent child-perspective, and stranger child-perspective.

Method

Phase One

Subjects. The subjects were 76 children enrolled in the Arts and Computer Camp held at the University of Waterloo. There were an equal number of males and females and the ages of the children ranged from 6 to 12 years.

Interview. Each child was interviewed individually by an adult female in a small room equipped with a hidden tape recorder controlled remotely by the interviewer.

Stimulus Stories. The children were asked to engage in retrospection and generate their own stimulus stories. Following two practice stories, the children were asked to generate six stories about their past social experiences; three with a happy outcome and three with a sad outcome. Following each story the children were asked why they thought the outcome occured the way it did. The main reason given was then coded by the child on the dimensions of internality (endpoints: because of me and because of other things, not me), stability (endpoints: probably would happen again and probably would not) and control (endpoints: there's something I can do about it and there's nothing I can do about it). This coding was done on 'attribution wheels,' adapted from Nicholls (1975), which provide an 11-point scale for each dimension.

Phase Two

Subjects. The subjects were 75 other children enrolled in the same camp. There were 37 males and 38 females ranging in age from 6 to 12 years.

Interview. The children were interviewed individually by the same adult female interviewer. They were told that the interviewer was interested in things that happen to children and that their task would be to listen to some stories and to answer some questions about each story. Each child listened to the tape of one same age child from phase one. Half the children listened to a child of the same gender and half to a child of the opposite gender.

Each subject then listened to the first social story and the subsequent attributions. The child was then asked to code the attribution along the dimensions of internality, stability and control using the attribution wheels. This was repeated for all six stories.

Phase Three

Subjects. The subjects were parents of a randomly selected subsample of 43 children from phase one (22 boys and 21 girls ranging in age from 6 to 11 years).

Interview. The interviewer went to the home of the parents to conduct the interview. The format of the interview was the same as that for the peer coders with a few differences.

Parents listened to the stories and coded the attributions of two children; one being their own child and the other child a stranger who was the same age and gender as their own child. The parents responded independently of one another. Also, the parents did the coding of the attributions along the dimensions of internality, stability and control once through from their point of view, that is, from the perspective of an adult. They then did the coding once through as they thought the child telling the stories would have responded, that is, from the perspective of a child. Parents were also asked to indicate how accurate they felt they were when they were responding to their own child's stories and to the other child's stories.

Results

The children were for the most part eager to relate their own experiences and the situations they generated often closely resembled the general themes of the hypothetical situations typically used. One difference between the hypothetical and the real-life situations is the degree of involvement the children appeared to experience with the latter type. These situations included personal details that obviously could not be included in hypothetical situations.

Children's Self-Codings. Repeated measures analyses of variance with event valence (positive or negative) as the repeated factor and child's age and gender as the two

grouping factors were conducted on internality, stability, and control. There were no significant main effects of age on internality or stability. There was a main effect of age on control ($p<.05$). A post hoc analysis (Newman-Keuls) indicated that the 6 and 7 year old group had higher ratings of control than the 8 and 9 year old group.

There were significant main effects of valence such that children gave higher ratings of internality ($p<.001$) and stability ($p<.001$) for positive events than for negative events. There were no effects for control.

There also were significant valence by gender interactions for internality ($p<.05$) and stability ($p<.05$). Females had higher ratings of internality and stability for positive events and lower ratings of internality and stability for negative events than did males.

Self versus Peer Codings. The self and peer codings were compared to assess how closely the peer codings resembled the self codings. This was accomplished in two ways: mean difference analyses and correlational analyses. With respect to self versus peer group differences, the only significant difference was for control for negative events in which the self ratings were lower than the peer ratings ($p<.01$). It then appears that at the level of group means the peer coders were good approximators of the target children's self-codings.

Of the six correlations between the self and the peer codings, only three were significant ($r(41) = .37$ for stability of positive events; $r(41) = .37$ and $r(41) = .30$ for internality and stability of negative events respectively). The correlational analyses indicate that the peers track their target child's ratings on only some of the dimensions.

Theories. Do adults have theories about how children explain their social experiences? To determine whether adults shifted their codings as they switched perspectives, the child-perspective codings were compared to the adult-perspective codings for both parents and strangers.

A repeated measures analysis of variance on internality revealed significant coder main effects for both the parents ($p<.01$) and the strangers ($p<.001$). Post hoc analyses (Newman-Keuls) indicated that adults' ratings from a child's perspective were more internal than their ratings from an adult's perspective (parents and strangers) for both positive and negative events. The coder by valence interaction was not significant. There were no significant differences on stability.

For the dimension of control there were significant main effects for coder for both the parents ($p<.01$) and the strangers ($p<.01$). The coder by valence interactions were also significant ($p<.01$ and $p<.001$ respectively). Post hoc analyses (Newman-Keuls) indicated that the adult-perspective

ratings were not different from the child-perspective ratings for positive events. For negative events the adult-perspective codings had higher ratings of control than the child-perspective codings for both the parents and the strangers.

These findings suggest that adults do have theories about how children explain their social experiences. Adults appear to think that children are more internal when making attributions for social events than are adults. Adults also expect children to see negative events as less controllable than they do themselves.

Prediction. To determine whether adults are able to predict how children explain their social outcomes, the self-codings were compared with the parent and stranger child-perspective codings. Repeated measures analyses of variance were conducted comparing these two coder groups on internality, stability, and control.

There were no differences between the self-codings and the parent or stranger child-perspective codings for internality or stability for positive events. Post hoc analyses (Newman-Keuls) indicated that for negative events the self ratings were less stable than the parent child-perspective codings, and less internal and less stable than the stranger child-perspective codings.

For the dimension of control for positive events, the

self ratings were significantly lower than the parent and stranger child-perspective ratings, as indicated by a post hoc analysis (Newman-Keuls). There were no differences for control for negative events.

Correlational analyses were also conducted. The correlations between the self-codings and the parent child-perspective codings for internality of positive and negative events and stability of negative events were significant ($r(43) = .28$, $.36$ and $.41$, respectively). The correlations between the self-codings and the stranger child-perspective codings for internality of positive and negative events were also significant ($r(42) = .35$ and $.28$, respectively).

It appears that adults are able to predict children's self-codings for only some of the dimensions. As well, there were no significant differences between the parents' and the strangers' ratings for any of the coding dimensions. There also were no differences between mothers and fathers. These findings were corroborated with correlational analyses. Thus it appears that no one adult group is better able to predict children's responses than another.

Common Interpretations. To assess whether children and adults code attributions in a similar manner, the self-codings were compared to the parent and stranger adult-perspective codings.

There were no significant differences between the self-

codings and the parent or stranger adult-perspective codings on internality. The adults and the children seem to have similar ideas about internality.

The self-codings were significantly lower than the parent and the stranger adult-perspective codings for stability for negative events (as determined by a Newman-Keuls post hoc analysis). The children coded negative events as relatively unstable while the adults rated negative events as relatively stable.

The children reported significantly lower ratings of control for both positive and negative events than did adults (parents and strangers) in their adult-perspective ratings (assessed through a Newman-Keuls post hoc analysis).

Correlations were computed between the self-codings and the adult-perspective codings. The correlations were generally low. Only the correlations for internality of negative events were significant ($r(43) = .28$ for the parent adult-perspective ratings and $r(42) = .26$ for the stranger adult-perspective ratings). Overall, the adult-perspective codings did not track the self-codings very well.

Accuracy. How much agreement is there between adult and child codings and are adults aware of their level of agreement? To assess this, a measure of agreement was computed by taking the absolute value of the difference between each adult rating and the corresponding child self-

rating. Each adult has one set of ratings for their own child and one set of ratings for a stranger. These analyses compared whether adults have, in fact, better agreement with their own children or with children they don't know.

Repeated measures analyses of variance were conducted to compare agreement for own versus other child for internality, stability, and control for positive and negative events. There were no significant differences between agreement for own and for other child on any measure.

Do adults recognize this lack of a difference in their perceptions of agreement? The answer appears to be no. Interestingly, the adults rated themselves as much more accurate with their own child (M = 7.17), than with the other child (M = 2.82), t (41) = 9.87, $p < .001$.

Discussion

It appears that adults do have theories about children's attributions for social experiences. Adults were making slight changes as they switched form an adult's perspective to a child's perspective. Two shifts occured for the dimension of internality. The adult-perspective codings were less internal than the child-perspective codings for both positive and negative events. It appears that the adults expected the children to be egocentric and attribute responsibility for events to themselves. In contrast, what the children themselves did is best described as ego-

enhancing: they saw positive events as more attributable to internal factors than negative events.

The comparison of the self-codings to the adult codings from a child's perspective allows an examination of whether adults are able to predict children's responses. The results indicated that adults are able to do this only for some dimensions (internality and stability for positive outcomes and control for negative outcomes). Children rated negative events as less internal and less stable than the adults predicted. The children either are more optimistic or more self-serving than the adults expected. The children also saw themselves as having less control over positive events than the adults predicted.

The effect of knowing the child whose attributions one is coding is minimal. There were no differences between parents' and strangers' mean ratings nor between the parents' and strangers' correlations with the self-codings for any dimension. Interestingly, parents felt their ratings would reflect stronger agreement with their own child's interpretations than with those of the other child. In contrast, the data reflect no difference in agreement as a function of the target child.

The children's self-codings were not strongly associated with any other coder's ratings. The type of coder used to code children's attributions for social situations will influence results, and this influence may be quite complex.

It appears that some differences are age-related. Adults may be attuned to this, as the association with child codings is bolstered when the adult is not responding as an adult, but instead from the perspective of a child. However, adult coders in the social skills research area typically are not instructed to "think like a child." It is worrisome to find out that codings from an adult's perspective were not strongly associated with the children's self-codings, as in this area agreement between children's own interpretations and adult interpretations is important. The origin of any relations of attributions to peer relational difficulties is thought to be how an individual interprets an attribution, rather than the particular attribution itself. The lack of correspondence among coders would suggest that if the self-perception is used as a criterion, then we should rely only on the self-codings.

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Table 1
Mean Scores for Attributional Dimension
by Valence and Type of Coder. (N=43).

Coder	Internality		Stability		Control	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Self	20.23	11.65	25.33	12.70	15.23	15.40
Peer	18.28	13.88	24.49	12.58	18.21	19.98b
Parent (Adult)	18.55	11.20	24.06	20.12c	21.01c	19.28b
Stranger (Adult)	17.95	12.32	23.44	21.17c	21.45c	18.67a
Parent (Child)	20.22	13.87a	24.30	20.95c	20.00c	14.58
Stranger (Child)	20.42	14.67b	23.95	20.87c	20.26c	14.12

Note: Scores can range from 0 to 30 with higher numbers representing stronger endorsement of that dimension.

Test of difference from self codings:
a $p<.05$
b $p<.01$
c $p<.002$